The Missing Boy

By Ervin Kosch

AI was used

The dust had settled on the windowsill like a fine, gray snow. It was the kind of dust that only accumulated when a room had forgotten the chaotic, joyful turbulence of a child.

On the center of the braided rug, arranged in a perfect, hopeful circle, sat the vanguard of the playroom.

“It has been three hundred and forty-two days,” announced Professor Polymath, a plastic electronic owl with a built-in encyclopedia and a slowly dying AA battery. His voice was a flat, synthesized monotone, but the way his motorized beak clicked shut carried a heavy finality.

Beside him, Barnaby, a floppy, corduroy hound dog with one mismatched button eye, let out a soft, cottony sigh. “Maybe he went to that place again. The… the Summer Camp?”

“Summer Camp lasts eight weeks, Barnaby,” said Captain Cobalt. The Captain was a die-cast metal space ranger, heavy and cold to the touch, with chipped blue paint on his visor from a glorious battle against the radiator three years prior. “This is not Summer Camp. The Boy is missing.”

A heavy silence fell over the room, broken only by the ticking of the wall clock. To a toy, a boy is not merely a companion; he is the sun, the source of all gravity and purpose. Without the Boy, they were just molded plastic, stamped metal, and stitched fabric waiting for the inevitable, terrifying journey to the attic—or worse, the curb.

“Then what do we do, Captain?” asked Sparky, a bright red tin fire engine. His siren hadn’t worked since the Great Juice Spill of ’22, but his wheels were still eager and sharp.

Captain Cobalt looked toward the bedroom door, standing slightly ajar, revealing the dark, cavernous hallway beyond. It was the frontier. The unknown.

“Our function,” Cobalt said, his voice ringing with metallic resolve, “is to be played with. To provide comfort, education, and heroic narratives. A toy without a boy is a derelict vessel. If the Boy cannot return to us, we must track him down.”

3. The Descent

Leaving the sanctuary of the bedroom was a logistical nightmare. The staircase was a sheer, carpeted cliff face.

Barnaby went first, his plush body absorbing the tumbling impacts as he rolled down the steps, serving as a soft landing pad at the bottom. Sparky was lowered down in a makeshift sling crafted from a discarded shoelace, while the Professor was carried strapped to the Captain's sturdy, die-cast back.

When they reached the foyer, the front door loomed before them—a towering slab of polished oak. But the mail slot, a narrow rectangle of blinding daylight, was propped open by a thick catalog.

"Calculated probability of survival in the Outside: fourteen percent," Professor Polymath whirred, his green LED eyes dimming slightly as a cold breeze swept in from the slot.

"Never tell me the odds, Professor," Cobalt replied, though his tin heart rattled against his chest plate. "For the Boy."

"For the Boy," Barnaby echoed, his velvet ears trembling.

One by one, they squeezed through the mail slot, tumbling out onto the concrete expanse of the front porch.

The Wilderness of the World

The Outside was terrifying in its sheer scale. The grass of the front lawn was a dense, impenetrable jungle of green blades that towered over their heads. The sun was a harsh, unblinking spotlight that made Cobalt's metal plating dangerously hot to the touch.

They marched for what felt like days, though the Professor assured them it was only four hours. Their first great peril came not from monsters, but from the sky.

The clouds bruised a dark purple, and the air grew thick.

"Moisture detected," the Professor warned, his voice skipping like a scratched record. "H2O is highly corrosive to metal alloys and detrimental to micro-circuitry."

"Rain!" barked Sparky, spinning his tin wheels in the dirt.

When the first drop fell, it was the size of a water balloon. It struck the pavement with an explosive smack.

"Take cover!" Captain Cobalt ordered. He grabbed Barnaby by the collar and dragged the soggy, increasingly heavy plush dog toward the gaping, black maw of a street storm drain.

They scrambled onto a narrow concrete ledge just inside the drain as a torrent of water rushed past them, carrying away dead leaves, discarded wrappers, and the terrifying, floating carcass of a tennis ball.

In the damp gloom, they huddled together for warmth they could not generate.

Barnaby was shivering, his corduroy fur plastered to his lumpy stuffing. “Captain?” he whispered, his button eye catching a sliver of lightning from the grate above. “Do you think the Boy misses us?”

Cobalt looked down at his own arm. A small, orange blossom of rust was beginning to form on his elbow joint. He felt stiffer than he had that morning. He knew the world was vast, indifferent, and designed to break them down. He knew they might end up as debris in this very gutter.

But he remembered the feeling of small, warm hands gripping his sides, soaring through the air while a child’s voice made the sound of rocket thrusters.

“He misses us,” Captain Cobalt said, his voice firm, echoing off the wet concrete. “A boy always needs his toys, Barnaby. He just… he just got a little lost. And it is our duty to find him.”

“Statistically…” the Professor began, but then his internal gyroscope whirred, and he stopped. “Statistically, love is an anomaly. But it is the only variable that keeps my battery running.”

They sat in the dark, a tiny, battered brigade, watching the water rush by. The storm raged outside, but inside, they were anchored by the sheer, unreasonable gravity of their devotion, waiting for the rain to stop so they could walk to the ends of the earth.

The Testimony of a Crow

The storm broke sometime after midnight—or what they estimated to be midnight, based on the Professor’s internal clock, which had been running eleven minutes fast since the incident with the microwave.

They emerged from the drain into a world scrubbed clean and glittering. The streetlamps turned the wet pavement into a mirror, and Cobalt saw himself reflected below—battered, rust-kissed, chipped at the visor—and thought he looked precisely like a soldier who had earned his campaign ribbons.

Their intelligence came from an unexpected source: a crow.

It was enormous, as all things were at their scale, perched on the lip of a birdbath two lawns over. It regarded them with one oily, intelligent eye, tilting its head in the manner of creatures who find the world perpetually amusing.

“Dangerous,” Barnaby whispered, pressing close to Cobalt’s side.

“Intelligent,” the Professor countered, his LED eyes brightening with a flicker of interest. “Corvus brachyrhynchos. American crow. Brain-to-body ratio comparable to—”

“Can it speak to us?” Cobalt interrupted.

The crow tilted its head the other way. It opened its beak and out came a sound that was not quite a caw—something lower, more deliberate. Something almost like language, if language had been invented by a creature with no patience for pleasantries.

“It says,” the Professor said slowly, his audio processors working, “that it has seen us before. That we smell of the house. Of the Boy.”

Cobalt snapped to attention. “It knows him?”

Another sound from the crow. A single, flat note, repeated twice.

“It says the Boy went away in a white machine. It says…” The Professor paused, something cycling through his circuits. “It says the Boy cried. At the window. The crow was in the oak tree and saw.”

The silence that followed was the heaviest thing any of them had ever carried.

Sparky’s wheels ground slowly against the wet pavement, a sound like a small and private grief. “He cried,” the fire engine said quietly. “And we weren’t there.”

“We are there now,” Cobalt said. His voice left no room for argument. “Which direction?”

The crow spread one great, ragged wing and pointed it—somehow, unmistakably, the way a crow points—down the long avenue, past the park, toward the taller buildings where the streets grew wide and anonymous.

Then it folded its wing, snatched a bottle cap from the birdbath’s rim, and flew away, unconcerned.

“Thank you,” Barnaby called after it, because he was Barnaby, and he thanked everyone for everything, always.

The Place That Smelled Like Floors

The building was a tall, beige thing with sliding glass doors that opened and shut with a mechanical wheeze. A sign above the entrance read MERCY GENERAL in letters large enough to be read from the parking lot—large enough, even, for four small travelers to decipher from behind the base of a concrete planter.

“A hospital,” Professor Polymath said. He said it the way he said most things: plainly, without editorial. But something in his circuits hesitated before the word, as though the entry in his encyclopedia was long and not entirely comfortable to recite.

Barnaby sat very still. His one button eye and one real eye—the second had been sewn on by the Boy himself, during a phase of intense veterinary play—both stared at the building's face. "Is he sick?" he asked.

No one answered, because no one knew, and they had all learned in the drain that false comfort was its own kind of rust.

Entry through the sliding doors was impossible—the gap at the bottom was sealed, and the sensor above triggered the door only for things considerably taller than four inches. But a loading dock around the back had a rubber flap propped open by a wedge, and they passed through it into a corridor that smelled of antiseptic and something older and quieter underneath, the smell of time moving differently than it did in a playroom.

The corridors were canyons. Wheeled machines taller than houses moved through them periodically, and the four of them learned quickly to press flat against the baseboards when they heard the rumble approaching. They moved in single file: Cobalt at the front, Sparky at the rear, the Professor strapped to Cobalt's back, and Barnaby—whose corduroy had dried into a stiff, slightly peculiar shape—somewhere in the middle, trying not to look at the ceiling, which was very far away and very bright and felt somehow like a judgment.

They followed the only evidence they had: a smell. Not the antiseptic, but beneath it—the particular warmth of a known human, the ghost of peanut butter and grass and that brand of grape shampoo that had haunted every bath-time battle for as long as any of them could remember.

"Barnaby," Cobalt said quietly, "is your nose still functional?"

Barnaby's nose was a small oval of embroidered black thread. It had no biological mechanism whatsoever. "Yes," he said with complete sincerity, and kept walking.

They turned left, then right, then into a wing where the lighting was softer and the corridor was lined with drawings—bright, crayon-vivid drawings of suns and horses and houses with improbable chimneys—taped to the walls. Children's art. A ward for the small.

Cobalt stopped.

He knew—the way a compass knows north, the way a magnet knows iron, without being able to explain the knowing—that they were close.

Room 14

The door was slightly open. It always was, in the way of rooms that have become someone's whole world and therefore cannot be entirely shut.

They went in through the gap at the bottom, single file.

The room was small and pale. A window on the far wall showed a rectangle of early morning sky going peach and silver at the edges. There were flowers on the sill—real ones, slightly wilted, and a drawing of more flowers taped beside them, as though someone had wanted backup. There was a chair where a woman had fallen asleep, her head tipped against the wall, a novel splayed open on her chest.

And in the bed, beneath a thin white blanket, was the Boy.

He was smaller than they remembered. That was the wrong thought, Cobalt knew—it was they who had grown in their devotion, swelled with it through three hundred and forty-two days of waiting, and so by comparison the Boy appeared diminished. He was pale. There were things attached to his arm and a machine beside the bed that breathed in a quiet, rhythmic way that was not his breathing but accompanied it.

He was asleep.

Barnaby made a sound—not a word, just a sound, the kind that corduroy dogs make when something they have needed for a very long time is suddenly in front of them. He moved toward the bed before anyone could form a tactical plan, and Cobalt, after a moment's deliberation, did not stop him.

They climbed the bedsheet by way of the dangling corner—a slow, effortful ascent that left Sparky stranded below, his wheels useless against the fabric. "Go on," Sparky said, and there was no bitterness in it, only the plain practicality of a fire engine who understood his own limitations and had made his peace with them. "Tell him I'm here."

Cobalt, Barnaby, and the Professor arranged themselves on the pillow beside the Boy's head.

Up close, he looked like himself again. The same dark eyelashes. The same small scar on his chin from the bicycle incident. The same expression in sleep—not peaceful, exactly, but absorbed, as though even now he was deep in the middle of some private game.

The Professor's green LED eyes glowed very softly. His battery, which had been dying for as long as any of them had known him, did not die. "I would like to record," he said quietly, "that this outcome was not in my fourteen percent."

"It never is," Cobalt said.

Barnaby pressed himself against the Boy's cheek. He didn't say anything. He was a hound dog made of corduroy and mismatched eyes and the accumulated weight of being loved and carried and occasionally forgotten under the couch cushions, and he did not need words for what he was doing. He simply stayed.

After a while, in the thin peach light of the approaching morning, the Boy's hand moved. Slowly, the way hands move when their owner is still half inside a dream, his fingers found the small, familiar shape of the hound dog beside him.

He did not wake. But he held on.

That was enough. That was precisely enough.

Captain Cobalt, die-cast metal space ranger, veteran of the radiator wars and the Great Juice Spill, survivor of drains and rain and a crow's oblique directions, stood watch on the pillow as the room grew light. The rust on his elbow had spread overnight. His visor was scratched. His paint was chipped in approximately eleven places.

He had never felt more like himself.

After

The Boy's mother found them in the morning—all four of them, Sparky propped against the bed leg where Cobalt had lowered him on a length of IV tubing he had repurposed without guilt, Barnaby curled against the Boy's neck, the Professor and the Captain standing sentinel on the pillow.

She stood in the doorway for a long moment, a cup of coffee going cold in her hand. Her eyes moved from the toys to her son's face, which was, this morning, more peaceful than it had been in weeks.

She did not ask how they had gotten there. She was a mother, and mothers develop an instinct for the questions that don't require answers.

She set down her coffee. She crossed to the bed. She tucked the blanket more firmly around her son, and around Barnaby, and she left the others where they were.

Before she left the room again, she paused at the door and looked back at Captain Cobalt. She looked at him for long enough that he felt, in whatever way a die-cast figure can feel, that he was being seen.

"Thank you," she said.

The Captain did not move. He could not move, in the technical sense, without the Boy's hands to animate him. But if his motorized parts had been capable of it, he would have saluted.

Instead he stood at attention on the pillow and kept his vigil, as the room filled with morning and the machines breathed their quiet, steady accompaniment, and the Boy slept on, one hand still curled around a small corduroy ear.

Three hundred and forty-three days. And then the counting stopped, because there was no longer anything to count.

There was only this: a boy and his toys, together in a room, which is all any of them had ever needed to be.